10: d'Orleans--266 T-3 (1891-92) 1894 Laos
116, 396, 462, 697, 834

[LSS: at Muong Ngoi] "As I walk down by the side of the river I find a very animated scene; prisoners are going to and fro with manacles on their legs, which do not seem to inconvenience them at all. Elsewhere, men are making rafts and cutting planks; some of them are sawing a tree; they work horizontally, in pairs, putting in wedges as they advance. Women are fetching water in buckets made of bamboo tubes; they take the opportunity of bathing, and do not seem hindered by any bashful feelings. There is a curious remark to make on this point: amongst the Thaï's of the Black River, the men never hesitate to strip themselves, and enter the water; but the women appear more reserved; here, on the contrary, they are the ones that feel no shame, whilst their husbands seem to avoid undressing in our presence."

degree.

289 Paper. The manufacture of paper using the bark of a tree called "Kok-Sa" (1) is limited to a single region of northern Laos.

(1) See Chapter VII.

It is not of any great importance, since it does not even suffice for local consumption.

The manufacturing processes are those familiar to everyone as being used in China, in Japan, in Annamite lands and in Burma.

321 531 Wood and ivory carving. Here we no longer have to deal with an industry, but with an art. The men who practice it are few in number, are highly paid, work slowly and are generally inveterate opium smokers.

Like the goldsmiths and jewelers, the wood and ivory carvers of Laos reproduce, ad infinitum, immutable models which their predecessors have handed down. They are, however, able to execute motifs from any given design. To be sure, they are inferior to their Burmese, Annamite, Malay, Chinese and especially Japanese colleagues as regards the movement, harmony, purity of form and finish of their work.

532 Fresco painting. The pagodas of Laos, which have been left untended for many long years, contain curious fresco paintings set off with gold, but lack of care and exposure to the weather have partly destroyed them. This art has very few practitioners in Laos, and it should be added that most of the existing frescoes are mainly the work of Burmese, Cambodians and Chinese of whom the native artists are only the pupils.

396 [438] Pirogue carpenters. Nearly all the inhabitants who [464] live on the banks of the big river or its principal tributaries are able to carve out a pirogue. Certain villages, however, have a monopoly in this industry.

When it is a matter merely of hewing out a pirogue which is to be used only for crossing the river, fishing or agricultural service, everyone does a fairly good job. But for the large pirogues which are reserved for regattas, voyages and commercial transports, recourse must be had to specialists. Only they know how to give their products

396 the purity of line and elegance, joined with solidity, which go to make up the deserved renown of Laotian pirogues.

If it be noted that some of them are more than twenty meters long and can hold from forty to fifty paddlers, it will be agreed that a certain amount of effort is necessary to bring trees from which the pirogues are to be hewed from the forest to the workshop.

It is difficult, without the help of a drawing, to give a clear idea of how a pirogue is hewed to any who has not seen the process. We shall try to do so, however, referring the reader to the illustrations reproduced in this work for an idea of the general shape.

[313] After being selected in the forest, the tree destined to be made into a pirogue is felled and then taken to the nearest watercourse, where it is floated to the workshop. There it is divested of its bark and sap-wood, and the heartwood is laid bare. Depending on its kind and shape, one side or another of the log is chosen as the bottom of the pirogue.

Carpenters armed with hatchets begin to shape the piece, being careful not to harm the wood in the center of its length, where the main beam of the ship will be located. They hew out the prow and the stern, giving them the elegant raised shape which the finished product will have. The piece of wood is then turned over. The thinned extremities are cut with a slight curve which is accentuated at the stern, and each end then has an outline shaped like a truncated fish tail.

Curved lines run from both ends to the more swollen part [465] which forms the center. A deep notch (1) as broad as a man's hand

(1) This notch is similar to that of a weaver's shuttle.

is cut vertically into the upper part of the still unfinished block, following the median line between the points of origin of the two ends, that is to say between the points where they join the body of the pirogue. This notch is cut deep enough to leave the requisite thickness of wood at the pirogue's bottom at the center of its length. It then decreases progressively, and disappears at the points where the ends join the body. Then levers are used to open up both edges of the notch gradually, while fire is also introduced into the hole and the bottom of the piece is kept wet. As the opening grows wooden cross-braces and chocks are placed between the sides of the trough which is gradually taking shape, like a pea pod being opened down the middle. Between each application of fire, and as the cavity grows larger, wood

396 is also cut out with a hatchet so as to decrease the thickness of the walls and render them more elastic.

When the pirogue is as wide as is desired, or else as wide as the wood being used will allow without any danger of splitting or bursting, strong rectangular crossbraces are set at regular intervals and tailed into the sides of the pirogues a few centimeters below the gunwales. When it has reached this state the pirogue is virtually finished. It has its final shape, and looks like the elongated half of a fish which has been split lengthwise.

All that remains is to finish the work by giving the bottom and sides the requisite thickness, by polishing the wood, smoothing the curves, etc.

Finally comes the moment of launching. It must be said, to the honor of the builders' sure eye and skill, that it is always successful and that once put into water the pirogue behaves well in its element, with a light and graceful balance.

396 439 435 The price of pirogues varies depending on their dimensions and [466] the region, and can therefore not be fixed in any absolute fashion. A new pirogue, in fact, costs from 50 to 300 francs. In Cambodia a pirogue from Laos costs twice what it cost in its land of origin. Thus it may readily be imagined that pirogues are exported from Lower Laos in fairly large numbers. The statistics for 1899 show exports of 552 pirogues of various dimensions, with a [Illustration here] total value of 55,195 francs, or an average purchase price of 100 francs apiece.

398 Cartwrights. The construction of carts, wagons, pack-saddles for oxen and elephant palanquins is a specialized industry only on the right bank and in Siam. In French Laos carts are little used because of the nature of the terrain, and there are no cartwrights. Pack-saddles for oxen and elephant palanquins are made by nearly everyone, particularly by drovers and carnacs.

317 Lime. Lime is made in Laos, primarily for inclusion in betel masticatories.

276 [467] The kilns are dug in the clay on banks of watercourses, near calcareous masses from which limestone is taken.

272 Alcohol. The distillation of grain--rice, maize and hemp-seed--is not an industry in the strict sense, for every village and every family makes alcohol on occasion.